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GAO Recommends Dropping Systematic Review of Secrets

Associated Press

The General Accounting Office recommended yesterday that the government abandon its practice of systematically reviewing all old classified documents and declassifying those that can safely be made public.

At issue are 617 million pages dealing with state secrets of war, peace, diplomacy, arms control, espionage, trade negotiations and other government activities in the area of national security.

The GAO, the congressional watchdog agency, cited the \$11-million it costs each year to pay people solely to review the papers.

But its proposal drew criticism from the National Archives, storehouse of old government records, and from Steven Garinkel, director of the Information Security Oversight Office, who called the proposal "drastic," "insupportable," "one-dimensional" and "illogical."

The GAO recommended abandoning the systematic review of classified documents put into effect by President Carter in 1978.

Carter directed agencies to look at all classified documents as they become 20 years old and declassify those that can be disclosed without harm to the government.

Previously, documents were not reviewed until they were 30 years old.

The GAO said more than 155 agencies hold 617 million pages of documents requiring review.

Instead of systematically reviewing all classified papers, it recommended that the government examine only those requested or likely to be requested by the public, chiefly historians. It estimated that 90 percent of the declassified papers are of no interest to the public.

People wanting documents that had not been reviewed could seek them through the Freedom of Information Act, the GAO said.

But the National Archives, in a memo from assistant archivist James E. O'Neill, said historians cannot ask for documents if they do not know they exist.

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